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Updates for February 27th

14 Feb - New York Jail Inspectors Smuggle Contraband Into Jails, Find Culture Of Corruption Alive And Well

An undercover investigator posing as a correction officer smuggled drugs, alcohol, and a razor blade into jails in Manhattan and Brooklyn with incredible ease and found the Department of Corrections failed to implement reforms it supported publicly for nearly five years.

MORE:

by Brian Sonenstein (*Shadowproof*)

A report published by the Department of Investigations, New York City's inspector general, recounts how an investigator bypassed security screenings at staff entrances to the Manhattan Detention Complex and the Brooklyn Detention Complex with minimal effort in September 2017. He carried two scalpel blades, 26.8 grams of marijuana, and five strips of the prescription opiate substitute Suboxone in his pockets.

This is the second time in the last three years inspectors have effortlessly carried contraband past officers into city jails.

The undercover investigator was not manually searched by corrections officers when he set off the magnetometer, nor was he asked to walk through the machine again.

One officer asked if he had contraband but "accepted the investigator's answer without conducting a physical search." Officers let the person being searched dictate how they would be searched and were observed letting their colleagues place food containers on top of X-ray machines instead of through them.

The inspector general recommended drug-sniffing dogs, moving staff lockers to outside the front gate, eliminating unnecessary pockets from uniforms, and hiring a dedicated independent team to handle security at staff entrances.

Notably, officers explained they do not search their colleagues because they work alongside them in the housing units. They are "asked to oversee the same corrections officers they must depend on to protect them."

This is what is known as the "blue wall of silence," an understanding between officers not to hold their colleagues accountable for abuse and misconduct, and that there could be consequences for those who do speak up. It is precisely the culture that has animated the legendary corruption and brutality in New York City's corrections department and what renders many reforms moot.

This report is a grave warning as the city moves to invest tens of billions of dollars in training, technology, and infrastructure for the demonstrably corrupt department as part of its effort to close Rikers Island and reform the jail system.

DOC Commissioner Cynthia Brann reacted to the report with optimism, saying investigators "didn't find fault with our policy but urged us to better apply our procedures which we are committed to doing, and we have already begun implementing significant reforms." But anyone following this story should feel an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

In 2014, the inspector general observed identical flaws and recommended identical reforms after undercover officers smuggled contraband with a resale value of \$22,000 into six facilities on Rikers Island.

During that inspection, officers did not conduct searches in a “thorough and consistent manner,” allowing investigators to bring 250 envelopes of heroin, 24 strips of Suboxone, a half pound of marijuana, a razor blade, and a 16 ounce water bottle full of vodka into city jails.

The corrections department agreed with and accepted the recommendations but didn’t publish a timeline for their implementation. Though they did issue a policy directive to address some of the inspector general’s concerns, and then-commissioner Joseph Ponte said the department had “zero tolerance for anyone, including staff, bringing contraband into DOC’s facilities.”

Since then, 27 corrections officers, 33 inmates, and 10 civilians were arrested for contraband and investigators believe the problems found at Rikers in 2014 are “equally prevalent” in other city jails today.

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Corrections officials are far more concerned with policing contraband from visitors and inmates than from within their own ranks. Roughly 80 percent of the city’s jail population is awaiting trial and thousands can’t afford bail.

The department has repeatedly increased restrictions on visitation and penalties for visitors and inmates, which have real collateral consequences. Visiting inmates in New York City jails is already an arduous affair, from the difficult and expensive journey to the harassment, humiliation, and abuse visitors face from corrections officers.

Limiting physical contact during visits is especially cruel, making it harder for inmates to cope with their detention and retain essential connections with their children, partners, and support networks on the outside.

In 2014, it was revealed DOC fingerprinted visitors for at least four years. Although fingerprinting was technically optional, most visitors did not know they could refuse. Had they known, they likely would have allowed the fingerprinting so their visit was not canceled.

The officer union has asked repeatedly for the city to allow them to use ionizing body scanners to scan inmates for contraband. They are illegal in New York because of the health risks they pose.

Lost in all of this is an understanding of the contraband economy in jails: how much money officers can make, the control it offers them, and what little risk or resistance they have faced in smuggling and reselling. The sheer number of officers participating openly in contraband conspiracies evinces a sense of comfortable impunity among staff. And that impunity is reinforced by the department’s policy and enforcement choices.

In 2013, three corrections officers were arrested as a result of investigations into contraband smuggling at Rikers. Austin Romain brought tobacco and marijuana into two jails and made nearly \$11,000 through an “elaborate payment scheme” with an inmate’s girlfriend. Khalif Philips was arrested for bringing marijuana to inmates, making as much as \$2,000 on one occasion. Angel Lazarte brought marijuana, oxycodone, tobacco, liquor, and scalpel blades to inmates and made several thousand dollars.

The following year, in June, two more officers were arrested the New York Times reported “at least 12 other correction officers and their superiors were referred for prosecution” as part of an investigation into drug trafficking, abuse, and falsifying documents.

After the corrections department issued new search protocols for officers that September, undercover inspectors smuggled contraband into six Rikers jails.

A few weeks after the 2014 contraband report, Jeffrey Taylor, a nurse for the jail's for-profit medical provider Corizon Health Care, was arrested for bringing tobacco, alcohol, and Suboxone to inmates. He was caught after investigators listened to over 400 DOC-recorded phone calls of Taylor openly discussing his smuggling operation.

In June 2015, a correction officer, an inmate, and two relatives were accused of smuggling contraband into the Manhattan Detention Complex. By September, the Board of Correction, which regulates city jails, proposed running background checks to screen visitors for "criminal records, visit patterns and trends, and visitor and inmate contraband history."

When an officer was slashed by an inmate that November, Commissioner Ponte published a statement, claiming the department was engaged in various reforms that inspectors would later find were not implemented in 2017. In December 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio released a "fact sheet" listing hundreds of millions of dollars his administration invested in training, technology, and new equipment to catch visitors and inmates with contraband.

The Board of Correction passed new rules to limit contact during visitation with little publicity in January 2016. By May, two corrections officers, a cook, and several inmates were arrested for contraband. One of the officers, Kevin McKoy, pled guilty and faced two to six years in prison.

Less than a week after their arrests were reported, an article from the local NBC News affiliate, which prominently featured union officials and officers, lauded the number of drug-sniffing K9 units now in the department and celebrated the strides they were allegedly making in cracking down on contraband.

Officer Kevin Cordova, who trained the K-9 units for the Department of Corrections, told NBC, "These inmates sit here and they have ways of thinking. All they do is think of ways to hide stuff all day."

One of Cordova's dogs found drugs and alcohol on officer James Brown that December. Brown was sentenced to a year in prison.

In January 2017, Raven Rakia reported on the invasive searches women endure when visiting Rikers Island:

Records obtained under the state's Freedom of Information law reveal that since 2010, New York's 311 call center has received at least 83 complaints about correction officers subjecting visitors to strip searches or cavity searches. The complaints range in severity from visitors who said officers made them open their pants or disrobe completely to those who said officers penetrated their body cavities. Over the same period, the Board of Correction received 84 complaints about visitors being searched improperly.

At least 27 women have filed or are in the process of filing lawsuits that accuse the Department of Correction of unlawfully strip-searching visitors. Most of the allegations involve searches conducted at Rikers, New York City's largest jail complex, but they also span facilities across the city's boroughs, including the Manhattan Detention Center and the Brooklyn Detention Center.

By July, the department revised its visitation rules by strengthening provisions that would let them deny people visitation, including the ability to revoke contact visits and impose stiffer penalties on visitors. The following month, investigators smuggled contraband into Manhattan and Brooklyn jails, finding not much had changed since their last attempt in 2014.

According to reports, in 2018, visitors to Rikers Island are being strip searched and sexually assaulted by officers. The focus remains on everyone but jail personnel, even though the Department of Justice charged two officers with smuggling contraband on February 8.

14 Feb - Meeting Mumia Abu-Jamal

Please read the following account of one person's visit to meet one of the United States' better known political prisoners.

MORE:

by Robyn Spencer (Medium)

He glided towards us, Samuel L. Jackson cool. Unexpectedly, we were confronted by his physicality. With each stride, disembodied voice became flesh and icon became man.

The room, full of men huddled with their loved ones in a tender web of public privacy, faded into the background. He was in front of us, taller than I envisioned and smiling. Uncertain at first, I gave his outstretched hand a firm shake, paused, then leaned in for an embrace. Our familial grins belied this awkward dance. We had never met in person before, but we were far from strangers. He was Mumia Abu-Jamal, an award winning journalist, a former member of the Black Panther Party and the most well-known political prisoner in the U.S. We were two Black women, who were members of the Campaign to Bring Mumia Home (CBMH), a grassroots organization formed by scholar-activist Johanna Fernandez in 2012 to bridge Mumia's long standing support base in the movement to free political prisoners with a new generation of young people fighting to end mass incarceration. CBMH members had been placed on Mumia's list of authorized visitors and serendipitously, me and Sophia's names had been the first two to be cleared. For years we had occasionally written to Mumia and spoken to him on the phone when he called into conference calls, meetings or events. The opportunity to meet him in the flesh had pushed us out of our beds at 5am that chilly fall morning and jump started an unforgettable journey.

After the first set of greetings, Mumia immediately gave us the rundown: Visitation 101. We took photos right away. Us: shorn of money, phones and underwire, and full of purpose. Him: clad in a burgundy jumpsuit, bearded, bespectacled, easing into an unguarded pose. Next stop: snatching the salad, the one with spinach, from the vending machine. Among the chips, re-heatable nachos and candy bars, anything green was gold. We picked a spot in the rows of side by side seating and he sat between us. We could have been anywhere: a living room, a doctor's waiting room, the departure gate of an airport, or a park bench. But our surroundings were not so benign. Over a dozen cameras clocked our every move and a guard walked around periodically to ensure food was shorn of wrappers and to disentangle lingering embraces. Violence sat cocked in the background.

We were in SCI Mahanoy, a 2,300 bed, medium security prison carved out of the harsh Pennsylvania landscape where coal once ruled and industrial development has faltered ever since. Prisons like SCI Mahanoy have filled an economic void, serving as an important employer for local residents and a magnet for visitors who purchase goods and services from struggling businesses. Frackville, the official prison zipcode, is 96% white, with a 6.6% unemployment rate and 21% of the residents living beneath the poverty line. Such areas have been fertile ground for the anti-immigrant, white supremacist message of the Trump administration and 70% of Schuylkill County turned out for Trump in 2016.

Mumia's story

Mumia's story of incarceration story began long before SCI Mahanoy—its sinews connect activist generations and movement genealogies in ways that point to the dismantling of America's carceral state.

In 1981, Mumia was convicted of killing police officer Daniel Faulkner in a late night incident in Philadelphia and sentenced to death. Mumia has maintained his innocence and his legal team has pointed to witness manipulation, a biased judge, and other irregularities and bias in his trial. At the time, he was a popular investigative radio journalist who had been targeted for his exposé of police corruption, his Panther affiliation and his positive reporting of MOVE, a Black radical organization whose natural living and anti-authoritarian politics had run afoul of the Philadelphia police and whose compound would be bombed by a military grade bomb a few years after Mumia's arrest. His supporters consider him to be a political prisoner, targeted for his dissident politics. He is not alone.

There are several dozen political prisoners in the US, most of whom are veterans of the most radical wing of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Political prisoners are an intrinsic part of the larger system of mass incarceration, which imprisons 2.3 million people, a rate that is more than five times higher than any other country in the world.

Political prisoners, according to carceral studies scholar Dan Berger, are “canaries in the coal mine.” He has argued that “some of the most distinguishing features of the American prison state—aggressive policing, hefty charges, preventive detention, lengthy sentences, parole denial and prolonged solitary confinement—were first deployed as means to stop radical social movements beginning in the 1960s.”

These movements faced repression from COINTELPRO, the FBI's counterintelligence program which launched a multipronged campaign of infiltration, harassment, spurious arrest, surveillance, and disruption against Black radicals, the New Left and others in the 1960s. Members were targeted for surveillance, arrest, and conviction because of their critique of racial capitalism, US imperialism and often, their support of the use of political violence and armed self-defense. Their trials were shaped by irregularities and illegalities, they received harsh sentences and often faced punitive periods of solitary confinement and other human rights violations in prison.

Mumia has condemned the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex in dozens of radio commentaries and nine books; and advocated for collective resistance and societal transformation. The injustice of his imprisonment, the clarity of his analysis and the urgency of his writing has attracted support from veterans from the civil rights, Black Power and New Left movements; students, labor union activists, and well respected human rights champions like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Noam Chomsky, and Angela Davis.

Melding Movements

In 1971 Angela Davis wrote that: “In the course of developing mass movements around political prisoners, a great deal of attention has inevitably been focused on the institutions in which they are imprisoned.” She argued that: “the political receptivity of prisoners—especially Black and Brown captives—has been increased and sharpened by the surge of aggressive political activity rising out of Black, Chicano, and other oppressed communities.” These conditions were evident in the early 1990s. During this period, the mobilization around Mumia's case dovetailed with a mass movement born in the face of skyrocketing incarceration rates; the war on drugs; and rising police brutality and violence epitomized the Rodney King beating. This movement condemned the carceral state, traced the history of racial criminalization back to enslavement and its aftermath, rallied against state violence and raised the question of prison abolition. It was led by local grassroots groups like NY's Campaign to Free Black Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War, and nationwide organizations like the Malcolm X Grassroots Organization, Critical Resistance, the Jericho Movement and INCITE! Books like *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Era of Colorblindness* (2000) by Michelle Alexander and *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis (2003), and

Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) provided the intellectual foundations of the movement while blogs like US Prison Culture, and research initiatives like Prison Policy amplified a strong structural critique of prisons. Incarcerated men and women using everything from their pens to hunger strikes to challenge their conditions have also played a decisive role.

After decades of appeal, Mumia's death penalty was commuted to a life sentence by the PA Supreme Court and in 2012 he was transferred to general population in SCI Mahanoy. This partial victory reinvigorated his traditional base of support and brought his case to the attention of a new generation of activists who flooded the streets in the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin that same year. The cry of Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name in the face of police killings in Ferguson, Baltimore and other cities flowered into the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a network of 50 organizations representing thousands of activists. In 2016, the M4BL created a wide ranging policy platform which included restorative justice and the abolition of prison, declaring that "until we achieve a world where cages are no longer used against our people we demand an immediate change in conditions and an end to all jails, detention centers, youth facilities and prisons as we know them."

Mumia's case, rooted in repression, surveillance and the dismantling of 60s liberation movements, is one key to the carceral apparatus that this new generation of activists seeks to replace. These young people have supported him as he fought back against attempts to silence his voice through the Revictimization Relief Act in 2015, and through his battle for Hep C treatment after suffering illness and almost going into a diabetic shock in 2015. These cases have shed light on prison conditions and Abu-Jamal v. Wetzel (the Hep C case) has been used by incarcerated men in Missouri and promises to continue to provide critical legal precedent for the fight for a humane standard of prison health care. Much like the cry to "Free Huey" and "Free Angela" in the 1960s, Mumia's name has become a shorthand for the injustice of the criminal justice system. His case bridges the distance between people who are ensnared in a politicized carceral apparatus through mass incarceration and those who are considered political prisoners.

Sophia and I literally embodied this history. Born in the 70s, I had been politicized in the 1990s activist upsurge and had learned about Mumia when the death penalty loomed over him. I joined the Free Mumia Coalition, helmed by former Black Panther, Safiya Bukhari in New York and over the years I had remained connected with his case. I joined the CBMH in 2014. Sophia was born in 1989 and had learned about Mumia through a class in college. She had been a part of the CBMH from its inception. Together, we reflect the intergenerational nature of the movement to free Mumia, its many waves, its connection to state violence and its regeneration in the crucible of Black Lives Matter. Our gender is not incidental. Just like vocal women of color and femmes have been at the helm of the M4BL, the free Mumia movement is led by women like Pam Africa, Ramona Africa, the late Safiya Bukhari and Johanna Fernandez.

Sitting with Mumia

What does one say to the most well known political prisoner in America? Sophia and I had prepared appropriately political topics to stuff into any holes that might appear in the conversation, had memorized greetings and messages from other CBMH members and had questions ready for the book party we were planning for his latest release, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*. But it turned out that we didn't need the scaffolding. The three of us fell into an easy rapport. Mumia immediately dubbed Sophia "Wisdom" and asked me both about my child and my recently published book, referring to them both as my babies. He seemed eager to not just talk but to ask questions and listen.

Our conversation unfolded languorously. Mumia turned the "Italian Sicilian" dressing on the salad into a dissertation on Hannibal, general of the Carthaginian army. We moved from the Mediterranean to the

Caribbean. Junot Diaz's brilliance in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* led us deep into the battlefields of French defeat in the Haitian revolution which led to Algeria, Fanon and neocolonialism. We moved from there to 1960s New York and Panther Afeni Shakur's role in the defense of the Panther 21. Here, our voices became a chorus, upholding the brilliance of Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama," the powerful 1995 tribute song to Afeni. We moved to the importance of women's activism, then and now. From Maxine Waters latest clapback to Trumpism; to the cancellation of WPNs "Underground" and the power of seeing Harriet Tubman portrayed on television; to the cultural impact of Nichelle Nichols as Uhura on *Star Trek*; to Safiya Bukhai and Afeni Shakur's role in the NY Panthers; to Black Lives Matter activist Ash Williams' confronting Hillary Clinton on her famous quote that "we have to bring them to heel" and the role of the Clintons in accelerating mass incarceration. It was clear that he had remained a sharp analyst of mainstream news, popular culture and grassroots activism.

Like Malcolm, Mumia had a ready smile and a quick wit. Although cut off from social media, he was aware of Trump's tweets and eccentric mannerisms as he was about his disastrous policies for people of color. He was a skilled impersonator who replayed dramatic scenes from his life complete with critical and often comedic commentary. He told us that he was deeply inspired by the young activists in M4BL and enjoyed hip hop citing TI, Lupe Fiasco, and Jay Z as favorites. Like the discovery that he was a Trekkie, these revelations were profoundly humanizing.

We shifted through comfortable pauses; mini lectures; intense dialogue and blackity black non-verbals. It seemed like every topic was a morsel to be savored; every shared opinion was a revelation; every divergence was an invitation to drill deeper; and every new bit of information needed to be tucked away for future research. We talked with deep political purpose and with light hearted abandon. We forecasted him traveling, teaching and getting back into the studio after he was released. We were liming (the art of doing nothing, hanging around, gathering, socializing, Trinidad); gyaffin' (informal, meandering talk, Guyana); skinning our teeth (grinning, Jamaica, Guyana) and shooting the shit, in diasporic defiance of the ways that we were governed by the clock, patrolled by watchful eyes and disciplined by the institution. We turned those three chairs into a classroom, a church, a kitchen—a place where our words melded like gumbo.

Somehow it was easier to talk about everything but where we were. But soon enough we dared to ask him about life behind the walls. Mumia has been locked up since he was 27 years old. He is now 63. He spent 30 years on death row, 28.5 of them in solitary confinement in a room the size of your average parking space. He'd been in general population since 2012 and was facing life. In our conversations, he'd often used the term "when I was in the world," to describe the time before his arrest. Yet, prison was also his world. What could he—would he—tell us about being inside?

Mumia spoke in broad strokes. He had successes as a jailhouse lawyer helping himself and advising others despite the 1996 Prison Litigation Reform Act which made it harder for incarcerated people to file lawsuits against prisons in federal court. He had developed a respectful relationship with some of the other incarcerated men, some of whom nodded, shook his hand and introduced him to their family in the waiting room. From commissary to contraband, from inflated prices to exploited labor, from the employees to the contractors, his words illuminated the bowels of the prison industrial complex—the economies within. He talked about the quotidian survival strategies he had snatched out of the jowls of death row and about the last 6 years in general population. His tone was dispassionate and he was open about the realities of outmoded technology, lousy food, hyper-surveillance, endlessly shifting rules and regulations and constant roadblocks. Gallows humor and books had armored him.

Yet, heartbreaking details spilled out from the crevices of his matter-of-fact telling. That moment when he felt wind unfettered by walls for the first time and thought it was going to "turn him around." The flowers that caught his eye, whose delicate, fragrant petals he had not wanted to disturb with a touch. The baths, a

hard-won medical prescription for the chronic skin condition left behind in the wake of Hep-C, doled out only on Mondays. Our visits had been punctuated by the muted soundtrack of his insistent scratching. The exposed skin on his neck, shin and forearm was darkened and discolored by shades of red and pink. Damn, I thought. Water and wind on hungry skin, flowers that lingered in the full bloom of eyes used to shades of gray—it was a sensorial reminder of all that prison takes. Of course, what it takes most of all, is time.

The inhumanity of 36 years—over 13,100 days in prison, over 10,400 of which were spent in solitary confinement—lay between us like a rancid odor no one wanted to claim or acknowledge. My mind thought: but how do you survive this? My lips said nothing. Instead, I thought of my own life. I was 11 the year Mumia was incarcerated. I was all elbows and knees, lived for “Fame” on TV and rode my bike on endless loops around my Brooklyn neighborhood. Thirty-six years was the yawning gulf between the much-coveted beeper of my tween years and the apps on my phone calibrating my middle aged life. While he was incarcerated Mumia’s children had grown up and he’d lost both parents, a sibling, and a child. In single file, in that grim room, I silently mourned for Mumia’s yesterdays and all that could have been.

It was love—of friends and family, of the worldwide movement determined to secure his release—that provided his oxygen. He told us that more than once, looking deep into our eyes almost willing us to understand that it was not a platitude. Supporting court appeals, organizing street actions, and grassroots political education are a crucial part of what the political prisoner movement describes as “the work.” But the movement’s lifeblood are the many unseen acts of humanity that nurture the spirit of political prisoners: writing letters and sending birthday cards, amplifying their writings, raising money for their commissary, visiting them, sending books, accepting phone calls, and emotionally supporting their families. In that moment, Mumia radiated gratitude.

We ended the visit by asking him for our marching orders. He advised us to pivot from the spectacle of the daily headlines to the news unfolding under the radar, especially the stories of successful acts of resistance and victories. He reminded us to keep an eye on judicial appointments at the federal and state level, and keep the pressure up through direction action in the streets. In January 2018, Mumia’s contention of judicial bias in his case was given new life as newly sworn in District Attorney Larry Krasner’s office has begun to review the role Ronald Castile, former DA and PA Supreme Court Justice, played in Mumia’s case. One scenario could be that Mumia’s legal appeals could be reinstated, potentially resulting in a new trial. The outcome of this investigation remains uncertain but it represents a major breakthrough. Activists and supporters are packing the courtrooms in February and March even as they continue to challenge the legitimacy of the larger criminal justice system.

At the end of the visit Mumia walked us back to the processing desk and made a joke about us getting our freedom papers, the documentation that was our ticket to the outside. Under the guard’s watchful eyes, we leaned into the second allowable embrace. We had spent a total of 8.5 hours together on our two visits and likely, we would not meet again inside those walls. We locked eyes and instinctively, I started nodding over the tightness in my throat. “Good-bye” was not an option. Instead, our movement salutations tumbled over each other. “Stay strong.” “Ona move.” “Long live John Africa.” “All power to the people.” To this, we added our “I love yous.”

15 Feb - Walter Bond has been transferred to the Terre Haute CMU

If you recently wrote to Walter at the Greenville Illinois prison address, your letter will probably be forwarded to the new address. If your letter is returned in the mail, just re-send it to the new address.

MORE:

Thank you to all the supporters who have sent funds for Walter over the last few months while he was on hunger strike and later while he was in the SHU. Now that he is no longer in the SHU and transferred to a new location, your donations will be put to good use.

February 22nd - Back In The CMU

I was transferred from solitary confinement in FCI Greenville Tuesday, the 13th of February, 2018. According to my notice of transfer I am here because "On December 4th, 2017, the SIS office at FCI Greenville completed an investigation and determined that on November 15, 2017, you enlisted the help of the North American Animal Liberation Press Office, (NAALPO relays anonymous communiques, photos and videos to the media about direct action undertaken by radical animal rights activists) to encourage members of the public to e-mail and call FCI Greenville, in order to disrupt normal operations in an effort to pressure the executive staff to agree to several demands to address perceived grievances you have with the institution and the Bureau Of Prisons. Utilizing the inmate telephone system, you provided a recorded message which was released as a podcast, announcing your intention to engage in a hunger strike, outlining your grievances and encouraging supporters to contact the institution in support of your demands. To deter your continued attempts of using inmate communications to convey threats to injure and/or kill civilians; it is recommended that you be placed in a Communications Management Unit (CMU) for increased monitoring of your communications to protect the safety, security and good order of BOP institutions, government officials and the public."

I was transferred in the morning in what looked like a hybrid between a tank and an armored car. by a team of CERT officers that looked like some sort of counter-terrorism Navy Seal team. I was shackled in a black box device that went over my handcuffs for further restriction and strapped to a chair and locked in a steel box barely big enough to house me and the hardware I was secured too. On top of this the transport vehicle was escorted by cars in front and back. Slightly excessive, in my opinion.

This is my second time in a CMU, my first was in USP Marion and I was there for 3 years. I currently have 3 years remaining on my sentence and I have no doubt I will be here until my release in 2021. In this CMU is the regular cast of characters, high profile cases, political prisoners, religious lunatics, and assorted thorns in the BOP's side. I have no real desire to concern myself with the issues or comings and goings of the men here. My last time in a CMU I was taken in by all the hype that these units engender, culminating in my becoming a Muslim, a mistake that I will always find a bit embarrassing having always been an irreligious person. of course today I am just as god-free, as I am drug-free, or meat-free. and much better for the wear.

Before my transfer to this CMU I was in solitary confinement in FCI Greenville for 3 months and I had left the foolishness of religion and imaginary lawmakers in the sky behind a couple years prior, and what I have found is I'm stronger, more aware and far better prepared to deal with any hardship when I believe in myself instead of false prophets and fake gods (and they are all fake and false).

I am currently waiting for my property to be mailed to me from FCI Greenville I have been told that my regular correspondence mail will be forwarded to me here in FCI Terre Haute for 30 days only. I am uncertain if any books or magazine subscriptions will be forwarded at all. In any event I will be posting a new booklist soon and I am requesting that for the time being I NOT be sent any books that are not on my list, or that I have not personally asked for, so as to not slow down the processing of my mail or bottleneck the amount of books I am allowed. However, Feel free to send any magazines or periodicals (especially Spanish language).

16 Feb - Black Panther film fuels calls for release of jailed political activists

Film serves as ‘opportunity to remind people of the real heroes of the Black Panthers’, says former party leader.

MORE:

by Sam Levin (*The Guardian*)

When he was released from prison in 2014, Sekou Odinga felt like he was falling from the sky into a foreign land. After 33 years behind bars, the former Black Panther party leader was released into a United States he didn't recognize – with strange technology and grandchildren he had never hugged.

Though he celebrated with family and supporters, Odinga, 73, also remained mindful of the many other civil rights activists who weren't so lucky: “You always feel like you don't want to leave nobody behind.”

This weekend, his advocacy group is gathering outside movie theaters across New York City to educate crowds at sold-out screenings of *Black Panther* about the real-life Black Panthers who fought for black liberation in the 1960s and 1970s – some of whom have also been fighting for their own freedom from incarceration for decades.

The Marvel superhero film, which is already breaking records at the box office, takes place in a fictional African country and has been widely praised as a well-timed political commentary.

For some activists, however, Ryan Coogler's film and mostly black cast is much more than a refreshing comic book story that breaks down stereotypes in an industry dominated by white film-makers.

The Afrofuturist film has sparked renewed calls from attorneys, families and civil rights leaders for the release of more than a dozen incarcerated former members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), the radical group founded in 1966 in Oakland, California.

“Many are in the worst prisons and the worst conditions, and a lot of them are getting older and suffer from health problems,” said Odinga, who was convicted of attempted murder of police officers in the 1980s, a time when the US government was aggressively targeting black power movements with surveillance, violence, arrest and prosecution. “This is an opportunity to remind people of the real heroes of the Black Panthers and the conditions they live in today.”

The film, which begins in Oakland, was released months after it was revealed that the FBI's terrorism unit had labeled some people “black identity extremists”, claiming that activists fighting police brutality posed a violent threat. The concept resembled the US government's highly criticized domestic counterintelligence program known as Cointelpro, which was used to monitor and disrupt the Black Panthers and other leftist groups.

“We have to educate people that this has all happened before, and it will happen again if we're not careful,” said Malkia Cyril, a California activist whose mother was a Black Panther. Kamau Sadiki, a former Black Panther whom Cyril considers an uncle, was convicted decades after the 1971 killing of an officer and is still in prison, where he has maintained his innocence.

“We need people to understand that these are not simply criminals who committed some heinous crime being punished,” said Cyril. “These are black activists who are largely being punished for their activism.”

Although the Black Panthers made news for criminal trials and clashes with police, the party's foundational work centered on “survival programs” for black communities neglected by the government – including free breakfasts for children, health clinics and “liberation” schools.

“They all uplifted people,” said Ericka Huggins, a former Black Panther leader from Oakland.

She said she hoped the film spread that message. She recounted when the former Black Panther Eddie Conway was released in 2014 after he challenged his conviction in the shooting death of an officer, for which he spent 44 years in prison: “He arrived on the outside of these walls with nothing but passion and love.”

Others deserve that opportunity, she said.

In the lead-up to the film, many have mentioned Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former Black Panther who had his death sentence commuted to life in prison and continues to fight for his release in a controversial police killing case. His lawyers have long argued his innocence, claimed he was denied a fair trial and more recently fought for proper medical treatment behind bars.

“Mumia is always focused on working toward the liberation of black people and all oppressed people,” said his lawyer Bret Grote. “He is quite optimistic and brimming with energy and life, and they’ve never been able to diminish that for a moment despite what they’ve put him through.”

Kietryn Zychal, a Nebraska writer and activist, said she would watch the Black Panther film closely so that she could later try to recount as much of it as possible to Ed Poindexter, another incarcerated former BPP member. He was sentenced to life for a bombing that killed an officer, convicted based on the questionable testimony of a teenager.

“His case needs some attention from people outside of Nebraska,” said Zychal.

Monifa Akinwole-Bandele, an activist whose father was a Black Panther Party member, said incarcerated BPP members, like Herman Bell, are repeatedly denied parole in the face of pressure from police unions.

She said she hoped the presentation of powerful black characters in the film could inspire audiences in the same way that the BPP inspired her.

“Adults I looked up to had taken such a bold stance against racism in America,” she said. “It had a huge impact on me and what I thought was possible.”

16 Feb - Federal Water Protectors Case: Three Non-Cooperating Pleas Accepted

The three Water Protectors who have entered non-cooperating plea agreements in their federal criminal cases have now all had their change of plea accepted by the judge and sentencing dates set.

MORE:

Red Fawn Fallis is incarcerated in Rugby, ND awaiting sentencing on May 31, 2018. On January 22, 2018, she plead to Counts 1 and 3 of her indictment (Civil Disorder and Possession of a Firearm and Ammunition by a Convicted Felon). Pursuant to her plea agreement, the government will recommend a sentence of no more than seven years and drop Count 2 (Discharge of a Firearm in Relation to a Felony Crime of Violence).

Michael Giron (Little Feather) is incarcerated in Rugby, ND awaiting sentencing on May 30, 2018. Under the terms of his plea agreement, the government will drop the Use of Fire to Commit a Federal Felony Offense charge and there will be a joint recommendation of 36 months in prison for Civil Disorder.

Michael Markus (Rattler) is out on supervised pretrial release awaiting sentencing on May 29, 2018. Under the terms of his plea agreement, the government will drop the Use of Fire to Commit a Federal Felony Offense charge and there will be a joint recommendation of 36 months in prison for Civil Disorder.

Each of these Water Protectors' plea agreements relate only to each individual themselves and do not harm other Water Protectors or require any information to be given about others.

All of the Standing Rock federal criminal cases include one charge that carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years. Red Fawn, Little Feather and Rattler have each made the very difficult decision to enter into plea agreements that will result in substantial time in prison, but also mean that they are no longer facing up to 15 years, and in Red Fawn's case, up to life in prison.

During each of the three change of plea hearings, the judge remarked on the very high rate of plea deals in federal criminal cases: 95% – 97%.

Red Fawn, Little Feather and Rattler will be the first Water Protectors to be sentenced to substantial prison terms for activity at Standing Rock. Water Protector Legal Collective stands by them all, and we call on Water Protectors and community members to continue to support them. Please see our Water Protector Prisoners page, and the links below to the support committees for information on how to write to them and other ways to be in solidarity with them through the sentencing process and as they serve time in prison.

Red Fawn and Little Feather are currently incarcerated, as is Dion Ortiz who is still awaiting trial on his federal charges. Rattler remains out on supervised pretrial release awaiting sentencing. All of the sentencing hearings will be in Bismarck federal court before Chief Judge Daniel L. Hovland.

There are three Water Protectors with pending federal charges who continue to prepare for trials in the coming months and over 300 remaining state criminal cases.

16 Feb - Medical Horrors at FCI Florence

Eric King's support crew would like to say this situation is representative of a bigger problem within the Bureau of Prisons (BOP).

MORE:

FROM EK Support Crew: There was recent information that has emerged that shows that the way the BOP is handling the hiring freeze is to have nurses double as cops. To quote Nurse Hendricks "I am a guard first and a nurse second" and THAT is the problem. In the medical field folks are asked to do no harm. Meanwhile they are asked to partake in the psychological torture that prison guards carry out and here is the kicker on the same people they are tasked to keep alive and healthy. One can not be in charge of the health of a person while at the same time the other aspect of their job is to dehumanize them.

From Eric King:

Since I have been at FCI Florence I have seen some real cruelty and vileness at a level I didn't think was possible, ugliness that would make your skin crawl. No, it wasn't from the gangs or the drug dealers, it was from certain members of the Medical Team. Specifically R.N. Hendricks. Fuck RN Hendricks.

Imagine walking out of breakfast at 630 into the freezing cold mountain air. Once your feet step right outside you see someone wearing scrubs and a smile, and you assume this is a helpful caring person. You are sadly mistaken. Within seconds that person is in your face literally screaming "SPREAD EM!",

referring to your legs. This person will then proceed to "pat" you down so aggressively you would be forgiven for mistaking this pat down for an assault. That assault quickly becomes a Sexual Assault when she forcibly grabs your penis and balls, forces her hand between your ass cheeks, laughing horrifically, muttering to herself "no one is getting past me today!". This is what life is like for many men at FCI Florence.

You may be asking yourself why she is taking this so fucking personal, that is because she sees herself as a "cop first, nurse second, so don't try to fuck with me!". to which one inmate replied "that explains the quality of your health care.." When an inmate tells her to keep her fucking hands off of his dick, her response is to quip "Well you shouldn't have come to prison!", before writing up that inmate for having the audacity to not want to be sexually assaulted. Is she looking for knives or escape tools you may ask? Is she doing it to protect herself and her co-workers? Nope, she is looking for extra milks that people may smuggle back to supplement their protein intake. I assure you that no one has ever hid a milk carton in their ass cheeks. Most prisoners held captive here at the FCI have had to deal with this sadistic handsy creep on this level, but some have to deal with her on a much more serious level, and at that more serious medical level Hendricks gets to really express her ugliness and hatred toward inmates.

There amount of horrors that she is accountable for is staggering and hard to put into paragraph form. Inmates with long histories of seizures have regularly had their dosages reduced by her-without doctors permission or knowledge- leading to ugly, violent seizures. If you make the mistake of having a seizure on the 2nd tier, you can expect to be carried down the steps not on a gurney, but by 4 members of staff, dragging you like a sack of potatoes. Inmates with cancer have REGULARLY been denied doctor follow ups (despite the doctors request), denied medicine prescribed by the doctor, and had information continually withheld by RN Hendricks. There are countless grievances against her for ignoring actual doctors' orders, losing medical inhalers, misplacing medicine, and changing dosages. I know this because I help type many of these grievances, and every time my heart aches for my comrades who have to go through this.

Imagine your brother, father or grandfather has had a doctor order testing for cancer, only to have RN Hendricks cancel the testing. Imagine them needing medicine for some disorder, only to have RN Hendricks change the medicine completely or deny it all together. This ruins lives. Recently she had the goons run into the room of an elderly inmate with colon cancer whom the doctor had ordered to have a walker. Was she racing in to help him? Fuck no; she was taking the walker back, despite the inmate having the approval forms on hand. This is real. This is serious. We have no other medical recourse. How does R.N. Hendricks justify this? "Shouldn't have come to prison". Recently an inmate filed a lawsuit against her after he went to the sick-call window complaining of pain and swelling in his testicles and she refused him service. He went back every day and each time she denied him help until it got so swollen they had to remove the damn thing. This isn't shocking to the people inside, we see it happen all the fucking time.

Hendricks is a soulless maggot, but she could not do this without approval or permission from above. She, like every member of this fascist brigade, answers to higher ups. She cannot act alone. She is permitted to do this by the Bureaucrats who do not remove her from her post. By their refusal to act, they are not only allowing it to continue, but condoning the behavior, and why wouldn't they? This is systematic abuse at its finest and this is what the BOP is masters of. The prison shields, protects, tolerates and accepts her behavior and the literal blood is also on their hands. R.N. Hendricks is an agent of a system that brutalizes other human beings, and as long as this system exists it will continue to act accordingly.

Fuck R.N. Hendricks..Until all are free

UPDATE

So to update on that I feel it's important that people know that I was called into the Lt's office by Lt. Estrada and asked whether I had been sexually assaulted or not. If I said yes I would be placed in Protective Custody and the police would be called and an investigation would develop which would lead to me being shipped. I am not an idiot. If I said yes and then refused to follow up that is another shot and I would get disciplined for that. I was told to sign a piece of paper saying I was never sexually assaulted by Hendricks. It is important to note that I never said I was, and only pointed out her very aggressive and questionable behavior. I signed that paper and went to visit with you.

19 Feb - NYC ABC Has Withdrawn Support for Brandon Baxter of the Cleveland 4

As a collective, NYC Anarchist Black Cross has decided to withdraw support for Brandon Baxter of the Cleveland 4.

MORE:

It has come to our attention that Brandon has been problematic, abusive, and manipulative to women who have offered him support, material or emotional. Brandon has not been receptive to concerns about this behavior. We are in solidarity with those who have been impacted by Brandon's toxic behavior and feel it is imperative to discontinue support so as to not facilitate any further harm to women. For these reasons, we no longer feel comfortable supporting or encouraging others to do so.

February 19th - Eric King Statement on Brandon Baxter of the Cleveland 4

"I don't normally write men political prisoners because I have had bad experiences... but I hear you are safe"

I cannot tell you how many letters I get that open this way. Stories of unwanted sexual conversation, requests for photos and attempts to start relationships. It is not difficult to not violate women. I do it every day when responding to letters.

A question for men in our community....Why are we being such creeps?

I remember the first time a female comrade called me out. I was in high school and it was over me being a creep about a facebook picture. I thought I was being funny or cute and made a comment that didn't seem out of line to me at all...She didn't call me out in front of everyone, instead just replied to my message, "Eric I thought we were friends, you are making me feel less". This one sentence stays with me still today because I never again wanted to ever make someone feel that way, whether we were comrades, friends, partners, anything. That sentence changed my entire life because it was the first chance to hold myself accountable, to look at myself and see a chance to grow. We didn't have the language to express what was really happening, I was being a patriarchal creep, that's the reality, but she knew I was making her feel less, and that was enough, that should ALWAYS be enough. That chance to grow didn't end in highschool, it didn't end when I turned 20 or 30--this is a continual growth, a continual re-evaluation of what is ok and what isn't. Even now when my partner lovingly calls me out on being patriarchal, I listen and take it very seriously, so that I don't ever make someone feel "less" ever again. There is no perfection here, there is no finished product, but there is a desire to always do better and to always grow.

What I am seeing right now from certain people and parts of the radical community, the MALE political prisoner community, makes me absolutely sick to my fucking stomach. In prison you may find yourself having to do things to survive that make you feel uncomfortable or gross, and that sucks. But there is NEVER a reason to hurt, manipulate, lie to, bash, coerce, trick, or in general be greasy to female supporters (or any supporters really). Being a political prisoner does not entitle you to be a misogynistic, manipulative piece of shit. Having support isn't a license to take advantage of people's feelings or solidarity, to use them

for your own purposes. It isn't ok in the streets, it isn't ok behind bars. We need to walk our talk on this issue, at least I do. We need to call out the people who act this way, or think this is ok.

Brandon from the Cleveland 4 has done all those things listed above and more, admittedly and purposely. When given the chance to do the right thing, to be held accountable, not only did he reject those options but instead he chose to victim blame. He has done major harm to different women in the community who tried to support him. And since that is the case, I want nothing to do with this guy. I don't want to be associated with him in any way, and that includes being associated with people who still condone or apologize for him. If you have romanticized prison to the extent to where you think this behavior is okay just because he has been oppressed, then please lose my address.

How we treat each other isn't a game. The women in our community still have to deal with rampant patriarchy and sexism and still have to deal with being called liars and exaggerates when they speak up. I bet we all know of a hushed story about a man in our community who has problematic behavior towards women. When these behaviors are silenced it just puts more women in danger of experiencing them. This isn't the future I want; this isn't how I want our revolution to look like. I stand with our female comrades and I know many, many others do as well, and when we see behavior like this, we need to work on it, and if that isn't seen as an option, then we need to smash it out. We need to start saying these things out loud, and as men it's time for US to start holding each other accountable and stop relying on femme folks to do the emotional labor of this.

20 Feb - No More Deaths Activists Facing New Charges

Scott Walker, a volunteer with No More Deaths was indicted on further felony charges by a grand jury last week. If found guilty, it would mean that others could be charged with "felony harboring" and also, conspiracy for providing humanitarian aid to those in need in the borderlands.

MORE:

These charges, along with the J20 case, attacks on Black Lives Matter and Water Protectors, tell us that the State is looking to expand existing laws in order to attack resistance movements. In this case, they are looking to criminalize the live saving humanitarian work that No More Deaths has been doing for years. As No More Deaths wrote:

Humanitarian Aid Worker Scott Warren indicted on additional felony charge, facing up to 20 year sentence

A grand jury has indicted Scott Daniel Warren, a volunteer with the organization No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, with three felony charges: two counts of felony harboring and one charge of felony conspiracy. The maximum sentence for these charges is 20 years in prison.

The new conspiracy charge is notable, as conspiracy charges have been used by the government to scare and suppress social justice movements and target political dissidents. This case holds critical weight as the Trump administration targets immigrant rights leaders and those who stand with them nationwide. Please donate to our legal defense campaign here: <https://www.youcaring.com/nomoredeaths-1095179>

No More Deaths is committed to resisting this troubling trend in enforcement and continue our work of ending death and suffering in the borderlands.

21 Feb - Virgin Island 3 Prisoners Moved Again

We wanted to let you know that a comrade in Arizona recently received a letter from Hanif Bey telling them know that he and the other Virgin Island 3 prisoners have been moved to Core Civic's facility in Tulwiler, Mississippi.

MORE:

Hanif noted that 24 men in total were moved from the private prison company's prison in Arizona to the one in Mississippi and that it was the worst transfer experience he has ever endured.

22 Feb - Waiting for Cuomo: NY Prisoners Hope for Clemency From the Governor

It's time for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo to live up to his pledge and cut short more prison sentences.

MORE:

by Victoria Law (*The Nation*)

In January, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo vowed to reform what he called the state's "antiquated criminal-justice system," and proposed a series of new laws that he said would "continue our historic progress toward a more equal society for all." But one strategy was missing from his plan—something he'd previously suggested would be central to his push for justice: clemency.

Back in October 2015, Cuomo announced an initiative to find inmates whose sentences he could commute, and encouraged attorneys and law firms to help prisoners prepare petitions. The governor raised the hopes of incarcerated individuals across the state, but so far Cuomo hasn't fully delivered. In December 2016, Cuomo granted just seven commutations. Still it was a record for him, and it did include one for domestic-violence survivor Valerie Seeley, who had been sentenced to 19 years to life for killing her abusive boyfriend. But then this past December, he reduced only two prison sentences.

Under the clemency project, Cuomo said he was looking for people who had served at least half of their sentence but would not appear before the parole board within the next year. Gordon Davis is one of those prisoners working with lawyers to have his sentence cut short. Davis was 16 years old in 1995 when he participated in an attack on his foster sister's ex-boyfriend, who she said had beaten her badly enough to cause a miscarriage. The man was killed, and Davis, his brother, and his foster sister were arrested. Davis initially agreed to a plea in which, if he testified against his foster sister, he would be sentenced as a youthful offender. While he was testifying, his foster sister burst into tears. Davis refused to continue, which nullified the plea. He was prosecuted as an adult, convicted, and sentenced to 25 years to life.

During his 23 years behind bars, Davis, now age 38, has participated in various prison programs. He obtained not only his GED, but also his bachelor's and master's degrees, rare accomplishments given that many college-in-prison programs have been cut. His childhood social worker, with whom he is still in contact, and his college adviser both attest that he has outgrown the impulsive judgement of his teen years. "This is the first time I have felt compelled to fight to get one of the young men or women released," his social worker said. "I firmly believe that Gordon should not have been in prison in the first place, let alone for as long as he has." Should he receive clemency, his college adviser has even offered to open her home to Davis.

Davis acknowledges that he can never bring back the life he helped cut short. But clemency would allow him a chance at a normal life, one that he never experienced as a kid first in foster care and then as an adult behind bars. "Getting a sentence commutation from the governor would mean I get to be part of their society. I would finally be able to give back to the people who invested so much in me.... And I definitely want to help other teens avoid the situation I ended up in, however I can."

Three years ago, Cuomo said he would issue a number of pardons for people who had been convicted and sentenced for nonviolent crimes that they committed as 16 and 17-year-olds. On this account, Cuomo has done better. Since 2011, he's granted 114 pardons, including more than 100 to adults who had been convicted as teenagers and have been out of prison for 10 or more years.

Still, other state governors have used their power of clemency more generously, particularly during their last year in office. Louisiana Governor Mike Foster granted 21 commutations during his last full year in office. His successor, Kathleen Blanco, granted 73 commutations in her last year. In spring and summer of 2017, California Governor Jerry Brown commuted the sentences of 16 people, including nine serving life without parole. For these five men and four women, commutation did not mean automatic release; instead, they are eligible to appear before the parole board, a chance that they would never have had otherwise. In December, Brown issued another 19 commutations, including nine people serving life without parole. Anticipating more clemencies this year, one woman currently imprisoned in California wrote that “everybody and their mother” (including herself) are struggling to fill out the paperwork, “because they believe Brown will continue his current path until he leaves office next year.”

Since 2015, there’s been a similar flurry of paperwork across New York State. Dozens of lawyers and law students have taken up Cuomo’s call to help with commutation applications. At the private law firm Patterson Belknap, for instance, attorneys have donated what would be \$1.55 million in billable hours to work with 10 incarcerated men on their clemency petitions. Each applicant works with two or three attorneys, explained Kathrina Szymborski, who oversees the pro bono clemency project at Patterson Belknap and who helped Gordon Davis on his application. Each legal team spends hundreds of hours tracking down each and every program certificate and prison job evaluation, gathering support letters from family and community members, and conducting legal research, including why the initial sentence might now be considered inequitable.

She said these hundreds of hours would otherwise have gone to the pro bono efforts to challenge wrongful convictions, help clients file for asylum, and represent tenants facing eviction or senior citizens facing foreclosure. But in 2017, the majority of her 580 pro bono hours have been filled with clemency applications, an endeavor that she’s hoping Cuomo will make worthwhile.

In December, Szymborski and her colleagues were happy when one client—42-year-old Michael Flournoy, who had served 21 years of a 25-to-50-year sentence—received a commutation. At the same time, she was disappointed that Cuomo granted only two and is hoping that he will be more generous in the coming months. “He still has a chance to ensure that these pro bono hours have not been squandered,” she said. “We don’t expect him to grant clemency to every single one of our petitions, but we do want evidence that he’s taking his clemency initiative as seriously as we are. Two commutations just doesn’t do that.” But until that happens, she is not assigning any more clemency applications to the firm’s attorneys.

Perhaps Cuomo, running for a third term as governor, is trying to play it safe, not wanting to be painted as soft on crime by his political adversaries. But even if that’s the case, Szymborski said, he could issue commutations enabling people to appear before the parole board sooner. That’s what he did for Judith Clark, initially sentenced to 75 years to life. Without commutation, she would be 107 during her first parole hearing in 2056. With commutation, the 67-year-old appeared before the parole board 39 years early. (She was denied parole. Her next hearing will be in 2019.)

In the past, Cuomo’s counsel Alphonso David has told *The Nation* that the governor planned to give special consideration to domestic-violence survivors, people convicted as youths, and elderly inmates, but this year Cuomo’s office did not respond to repeated calls and e-mails for comment.

Meanwhile, most of the recipients of Cuomo’s clemencies are now out of prison rebuilding their lives. Michael Flournoy is home with his wife and daughters. Valerie Seeley recently celebrated the first anniversary of her return home, surrounded by family and friends. She said she hopes that Cuomo will extend that second chance to others. “I hope that before he comes out of office, he’ll consider other

people,” she said. Seeley said she particularly wants the governor to look at the cases of incarcerated women, “because they always forget about us.” But, she added, “Everybody deserves a second chance.”

23 Feb - Prisoners in ‘TV Facilities’ Can Now Receive Books

A memo from prison officials claims they’ve been able to get them all along.

MORE:

by Rebecca McCray (*Village Voice*)

Late last Friday morning, a pleasant surprise landed in the inbox of Legal Aid attorney Caroline Hsu. It was a memo from the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, issuing guidance to all staff about an exception to a directive called “Inmate Television Sets.” The policy restricts the number of personal packages prisoners can receive in nine prisons designated as “TV facilities” — in which inmates have the option to buy a personal TV set from the prison commissary — as well as the content of those packages.

The memo Hsu received instructs staff that prisoners in TV facilities are permitted to receive a variety of reading materials, in spite of other restrictions: “Staff are reminded that the limits set forth in this directive do not apply to books, magazines, and periodicals. Packages containing these printed materials are not to be counted towards the two-package limit outlined in Directive #4921.”

Just two days earlier, Hsu and her colleagues had contacted DOCCS officials to clarify the ambiguous package-restriction policy. “We told them that we thought the policy should be that books don’t count in the package limitations, and that the facilities were not implementing the policy correctly,” she says. “We were heartened by both their attentiveness to this issue and the speed with which they resolved it.”

Yet the memo itself reads less like a policy change and more like a reminder to DOCCS staff of a pre-existing rule. This “reminder” is at odds with a February 7 *Village Voice* investigation that found that many of the 13,000 inmates housed in these nine TV facilities have been unable to receive any packages containing books.

“If this was the policy all along, no one working at the TV facilities knew about it,” public defender Ben Schatz tells the *Voice*. “I have been told directly by prison officials at multiple corrections facilities that I cannot send books to my clients because the facility is a TV facility.”

The limits described by the memo, which are documented on the DOCCS website, dictate that prisoners in TV facilities can only receive two personal packages per year from “family, friends, or other personal sources” weighing up to twenty pounds, and the packages can only contain food. But the new DOCCS memo, and the department’s spokespeople, are now telling a different story.

“It’s always been the case that inmates can receive books,” Patrick Bailey, DOCCS public information officer, told the *Voice* on Friday. Responding to a suggestion that the policy’s language implies personal packages that don’t contain food aren’t allowed, he said, “That’s not true. The inmates and staff know that. I think you’re confused.”

“The reason for the memo, obviously, is that everybody’s reading books now,” suggests Tom Mailey, also a DOCCS public information officer. “Perhaps the inmates didn’t understand the policy before, or the staff was confused.”

These responses fly in the face of the stories of people like Schatz, whose office is full of returned packages of books. It also conflicts with the experiences of organizations like Books Through Bars, which sends free books to prisoners all over the country.

“We’ve been told time and time again through rejected books, or the [TV facility] prisoners themselves, that they cannot receive free books from the outside,” says Daniel McGowan, a Books Through Bars volunteer. “The experience of people that have tried to send books for the past ten-plus years is very real.”

Since early January, McGowan and Legal Aid’s Hsu have organized with a coalition of advocates to pressure DOCCS to change current and proposed restrictions on who can and can’t send packages to prisoners in New York State, and how many packages the prisoners can receive. Though Hsu had occasionally received complaints from prisoners at TV facilities about not being able to receive books, she says they realized while working with Books Through Bars “that far more books were being rejected for this reason than we thought.”

Following the Voice investigation, she says, “it became clear to us that the problem might be more widespread,” which spurred her to reach out to DOCCS officials.

Since the release of the memo, McGowan is cautiously optimistic, but skeptical. “I’m not confident we’re going to be able to get books into these places,” he says. Still, he is already packaging and sending books to TV facility prisons, and stands ready with the rest of the advocacy coalition to push back if they continue to be rejected.

“There was a huge underestimation of just how important these packages are to people’s sense of humanity and identity,” says Hsu. “These packages are one of the huge things that really tell our clients that they’re people and not just animals, and they’re treated like animals all the time,” says Hsu. “My clients tell me [receiving them] keeps them sane and feeling human.”

24 Feb - Parole Letters Needed for Dr. Mutulu Shakur

Please write a parole support letter to the Parole Board on behalf of Dr. Mutulu Shakur.

MORE:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PAROLE LETTER FOR DR. MUTULU SHAKUR

1. Describe why you believe he deserves the chance for parole, such as positive activities while incarcerated such as education and mentoring other inmates, as well as his positive attitude.
2. Mention if there is any specific way(s) you intend to provide support once he is granted parole (housing, employment, healthcare, etc.). Generally, these are the subjects that letter writers may want to cover:
3. Include a short acknowledgment about Mutulu's conviction. Basically that the author knows that he was arrested in 1986 and eventually convicted of conspiracy to commit serious and violent crimes based on circumstantial and informant testimony. The prosecution never argued that these crimes were committed for greed or personal gain.
4. Letters should not defend or justify the alleged conduct that led to the convictions, but in the writer's own words acknowledge that s/he is aware of the conviction and the severity of the allegations.
5. Explain that these are different historical times and for many years while in prison
 - A. Mutulu has never engaged in illegal or violent conduct.
 - B. He has maintained relationships with family, friends and colleagues outside the prison.
 - C. He has suffered a stroke while in prison in February 2013.
 - D. He has also throughout his prison term maintained a commitment to the struggle for justice for people of color.

E. If Mutulu is released, he will be a productive member of society. He'll contribute to efforts to help the poor and those who are marginalized.

F. He is highly unlikely to violate the terms of parole.

G. He will in no way be a threat to the public safety.

Also go to <http://www.mutuluiswelcomehere.com> and write a testimony on how Dr. Shakur has touched and influenced your life.

Please send your parole support letter to the Parole Board:

Case Operations, U.S. Parole Commission
90 K Street, N.E. Third Floor
Washington, D.C. 20530

You can send emails to pschey@centerforhumanrights.org and mutulushakur@hotmail.com.

Also check out Family and Friends of Dr. Mutulu Shakur at mutulushakur.com

7 Mar - Release Aging People in Prison NY Meeting

WHAT: Meeting

WHEN: 6:00-8:15pm, Wednesday, March 7th

WHERE: Correctional Association of New York - 22 Cortlandt Street, 33rd Floor NYC

COST: FREE

MORE:

Refreshments, including pizza, will be provided. For more information, call 646.793.9082, x 1014 or email nyrappcampaign@gmail.com